

Living on Borrowed Time

GOKHALAND CAN WAIT, BUT GORKHALAND WARRIORS CANNOT. Much in the line of Palestinian Authority mechanism, the Gurungs at last settled for GTA–Gorkhaland Territorial Administration—for the time being, hopefully not to miss the tourist bonanza in the coming festive seasons. The tripartite agreement as inked by the Centre, West Bengal State Government and the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, doesn't negate the demand of the separate state for the hill areas of Darjeeling district, including some enclaves of Siligiri, Terai and Dooars. The tribals of Terai and Dooars are opposed to greater GTA and the very wording of the pact, particularly the inclusion of the term 'territorial' keeps the 'land for peace' option quite open in the future. For the Gurungs the idea of one step back at a time when a mood of change seems to have gripped the psyche of a large section of the population, is not a bad strategy. No doubt after the signing of the tripartite accord both the centre and the newly elected state government heaved an audible sigh of relief as they would have some breathing space to address other sensitive issues. GTA is unlikely to have much impact on the Telengana statehood question but the centre may adjust its Telengana stance to cope with recent turbulence.

The erstwhile CPM-led Left Front Government never really took a bold initiative to resolve the Gorkhaland tangle as they found it convenient to indulge in delaying tactics while trying to create a wedge between the hills people and the tribals living in the plains of Terai and Dooars aggravating the crisis situation. Of the many disturbing legacies left by the British Gorkhaland is one.

For one thing communists in India have a chequered history of committing blunders at every critical juncture, only to repent later. Their dialectical approach is anything but dialectical. Right now they have no policy on the issue of right to self-determination, not to speak of cessation. They defended Pakistan Resolution, rather 'Pakistan Nation', by distorting marxist reasoning to suit their purpose. Ironically though, it was Gandhian Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India, who refuted their 'Separate Nation Theory' by citing the definition of Nation from Stalin's 'National Question'. Also they were not averse to the idea of a separate sovereign Gorkhaland. But today they are opposing a separate Gorkhaland State within Indian Union without defending marxism even of their kind. They have not learnt anything from the Chinese communists who have pacified dozens of ethnic minorities by awarding them a sense of distinct identity through the creation of autonomous administrative units. Barring Tibet which is again a different issue, not related to usual ethnic question, no major revolt occurred in any Chinese province though islamic insurgency in the West was again somewhat different because of its international dimension.

Middle class aspirants who have no meaningful job prospects under the neo-liberal regime of jobless growth find it easy to assert themselves by demanding more states, rather smaller states, taking advantage of regional imbalance perpetrated by the Centre's flawed policies. There is something fundamentally wrong with the Centre's regional policies which are discriminatory in nature. As more and more people are demanding decent life and job security whether Gorkhaland can meet the challenges posed by the growing middleclass of the hills is anybody's guess. As they have no agenda other than managing—or looting—the exchequer, it doesn't matter whether it is big or small, the limits to growth are all too apparent.

The role of business community and industrialists in the Gorkhaland agitation is one area that merits scrutiny. The Gurungs never really explored the objective possibility of mobilising workers against the erring owners of closed tea gardens. Nor did they place a blueprint for the revival of tea industry—the life-line of the economy of the hills and Teria-Dooars region. Without the development of labour-intensive industries in the hills, the ever growing brigade of unemployed youth will not allow the Gurungs to sleep in peace even in their promised paradise—Gorkhaland.

If GTA experiment succeeds in maintaining peace, it may be recreated elsewhere. Indications are that initial euphoria seems to be withering. It is the land question with a different perspective. How claims and counter-claims by the Nagas and the Kukis over a few villages in Manipur continues to prolong mistrust and bloodshed is a case in point. If the Gurungs stick to their claim of retaining a few tribal mouzas in their proposed administrative set up, the hills pact may go down in history as one more exercise in escapism. □□□